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Posted: August 8, 2010 05:32 PM

## **What the Success of Women Rabbis Means for Judaism**

The *Forward*, a national newspaper of news and opinion about Jewish life, recently published a list of 50 influential women rabbis in America. It was a response to the annual *Newsweek* list of the 50 "most influential" American rabbis, which includes very few women, none of whom are high on the list.

The emergence of these lists suggests both good and bad news. The bad news, as exemplified by the *Newsweek* list, is that the criteria can be arbitrary and highly subjective. The determination of who is "influential" is not determined by a poll or survey or any systematic approach, but rather by a couple of men from Hollywood whose notions of success are still hierarchical and gendered. Do we really want to measure our rabbis on their media presence or the size of their congregations? Is the impact they have made on Judaism in their careers only worth 10 points?

The good news, as reflected in the *Forward* list, is that there are now enough women rabbis that a list of 50 represents only a small percentage of the field. Currently, between 40 and 68 percent of the rabbinic students at the major non-Orthodox rabbinical seminaries are women. When I was ordained in 1976, I was the only woman in my class, and only two had preceded me. In those days whenever I was invited to speak, it was on the role of women in Judaism. One memorable moment was on a radio show where the well-known Jewish host demanded of me, "What is more important: your Judaism or your feminism?" I paused, and then asked him, "And what is more important to you, your heart or your liver?" Silence. I was never invited back on his show.

In "From Periphery to Center: A History of the Women's Rabbinic Network" (*CCAR Journal*, summer 1997), Carole Balin writes that in 1980

[L]eaders of the Women's Rabbinic Network [an organization of Reform Women Rabbis founded that year] collected data ... summarizing the accumulated fears of congregants, boards, and senior rabbis with regard to hiring women as rabbis. ... Among the apprehensions cited were the following: a basic fear that women cannot do the job

because the rigors of the rabbinate are too great and women too weak for the demanding routine; the Torah is too heavy; women are too soft-spoken; women do not know how to, nor care to, wield power or authority; women will need to be protected by the board or senior rabbi in confrontational situations; women will cry at meetings when pressured or criticized; women will create more work for the senior rabbi because congregants won't want to employ the services of women for certain events, plus the senior rabbi won't want to call her late at night, in dread of pulling her away from family responsibilities ...

Another even more ominous fear

was of women succeeding. Women who succeed will reflect poorly on their colleagues. If women can read from the torah, preach, and teach, the rabbis' duties become accessible to everyone. The mystique is lost. This possibly leads to the breakdown of the hierarchy of the rabbi-congregant relationship.

The last fear was well founded. Many more than the 50 influential women rabbis have succeeded. Their success has led to a breakdown of hierarchy between rabbis and congregation. It has led to a more inclusive Judaism, to more openness to spirituality. It has led to new questions about God -- who is the God we want to speak toward and how do we find a language in prayer that reflects the complexity of how Jews experience God? It has led to new rituals that celebrate the truth that divinity is present at every moment in our lives and that we can celebrate that through blessings and ceremonies that honor the Torah of our lives as well as the Torah of tradition. It has led to new models of leadership -- partnership instead of hierarchy, empowerment instead of "power over" -- and it has changed the culture and structure of synagogues and other Jewish institutions to become more participatory and less focused on one leader.

This change is occurring in all the movements of American Judaism, including the Orthodox. While there is still debate over what to *call* Sara Hurwitz, the Orthodox woman ordained by Rabbi Avi Weiss, there is no doubt that she is a rabbi. Her continuing impact on the Jewish world promises to be revolutionary.

Judaism has changed because women rabbis have helped shape the conversation. Perhaps it is time for a deeper and broader conversation about the criteria we should use to measure the success of all our rabbis.